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# System Change Agents: A Profile of Grantmaking Foundations Focused on Public Policy

By Peter R. Elson and Sara Hall

**SUMMARY:** In a newly released [working paper](#) created under the auspices of the Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian Philanthropy (LaboMTL)[\[1\]](#), Peter Elson and Sara Hall explore the complexity inherent in making policy changes over the long term. For this paper, a number of grantmaking foundations were interviewed at length to explore the nature, scope and strength of their engagement in public policy.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Dans [un document de travail](#) qui vient d'être publié et qui a été préparé sous les auspices du Laboratoire montréalais de recherche sur la philanthropie (LaboMTL), Peter Elson et Sara Hall examinent la complexité inhérente au changement des politiques à long terme. Plusieurs fondations subventionnaires ont été interrogées longuement pour la rédaction de ce document afin de connaître la nature, la portée et l'intensité de leur engagement dans le domaine des politiques gouvernementales.

Many Canadian grantmaking foundations have the latitude and resources to make significant contributions to the communities in which they operate. Yet, only a fraction of these foundations are actively engaged in funding, supporting, and engaging in the development of public policy. This study sought to discover how these subject foundations operate and what lessons their work might have for other grantmaking foundations.

The foundations selected for this study met the following criteria: 1) independently recognized leaders in a particular field of public policy; 2) with an active and sustained engagement in public policy for at least five years; and 3) a commitment of significant resources to achieving a clear and explicit public policy objectives.

The grantmaking foundations focused on policy:

- Were either founded with a commitment to public policy or have made the transition from program funding to a clear focus on public policy
- See public policy engagement as the primary vehicle to achieve their charitable purpose
- Plan their public policy engagement in terms of decades, not years

- Collaborate with funding or government partners when and where and for as long as there is a strategic alignment with their policy objectives
- Engage in the full spectrum of public policy engagement processes: research and issue identification/policy formulation and convening/political advocacy/policy implementation/policy impact assessment and renewal
- Have a board that is fully committed to their public policy engagement

How do they do it?

These foundations:

- See themselves as agents of systemic change – working and funding to shift systems and upstream causes of issues
- Believe in horizontal and vertical integration – simultaneously engaging across multiple policy streams and within multiple jurisdictions
- Have a clear focus and end-game for their public policy initiative
- Experiment and assess strategies extensively and are not adverse to changing strategies when they do not work
- Develop both short-term reactive and long-term systemic strategies
- Use both hard and soft policy engagement tools: soft tools in this context are reputation, independence and legitimacy; hard tools include convening, funding, quiet diplomacy and collective advocacy
- Engage policy systems and agents – work to modify and change systems as well as supporting individual agents to develop and exercise their policy credentials

While utilizing recognized public policy investment tools such as research, convening and coalition building were utilized by all the foundations in this study, these foundations were also prepared to put their reputations on the line; leverage their legitimacy, whether earned or awarded; engage in quiet diplomacy; and where and when opportune, engage in collective advocacy.

These grantmaking foundations also engage in public policy for the long-term and have the patience and perseverance to keep their eye on their policy objective while continually monitoring, assessing and adjusting strategies as new information and opportunities come to light. These Canadian grantmaking foundations provide valuable insights into the complex systems associated with public policy engagement.

Ultimately, there are three questions for any grantmaking foundation wishing to pursue change through policy:

- Will supporting front-line services ever eliminate the conditions that your foundation seeks to change?
- What upstream policies create the conditions that your foundation wants to change?
- Who are the policy leaders /or potential partners/ allies associated with the conditions your foundation wants to change?

These are examples of the type of questions that the foundations focused on public policy asked themselves in the process of making the transition to becoming an agent of systemic change.

Is your grantmaking foundation ready to be an agent of systemic change?

[\[1\]](#) The Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian Philanthropy (LaboMTL) was originally created in 2014 to host a three-year SSHRC Partnership Development project entitled “Social Innovation, Societal Change, and Canadian Grantmaking Foundations”.